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## IN A BALKAN CAPITAL

BY HAMILTON FISH ARMSTRONG

LIÈGE—Verdun—Belgrade: a triumvirate in martyrdom and in honor. I read to-day that the Serbian capital, twice bombarded by the Austrians, twice captured and pillaged, had been awarded by France the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor. She takes her place with her sister cities which in the first years of the war showed the world how to die, but, dying, to stand firm in defiance of the enemy.

I saw Belgrade first across the Danube from Semlin very early on a winter morning when the Austrians and Magyars had been gone only a few weeks from the city, after holding it for three years. Patches of snow covered the tumbled debris and capped with white the mounds and ragged bits of wall that marked where the old Turkish quarter had formerly stretched along the river-front. The ruins of an ancient European town are very different from the remains that one sees after a fire in a modern iron-and-concrete American city. The masonry and plaster simply crumple up in a disconsolate mass, with only here and there a protruding wall or strange-shaped chimney to mark the work of some old mason who builded better than his fellows.

Only one of the former fleet of Danubian river-ferries was then in commission, the others having been disabled by the Austrians when they were finally forced to flee northward in the fall of 1918 before the armies of Mishitch, the Serbian Voivode, and his French allies. They left in such a hurry that they did not get all the loot available, for although they had been in possession of Belgrade so long, they had not stripped it of its more bulky treasures, being quite convinced that they were to remain there as masters forever and convert it into an Austrian city. Then, when the Allied force came sweeping up from Saloniki in unexpectedly rapid jumps, the Austrians only had time to load the loot on barges and ferries; they did not have a chance to unload it on the

opposite shore, and consequently the Serbians regained part of it when they arrived, including several barge-loads of pianos. There were over six hundred of these pianos, practically all that Belgrade had owned. The fleeing Austrians had had time to sink some of the barge-loads of spoil which they were forced to abandon, but part was still on board the nondescript craft moored along the Semlin wharves or stuffed into the old water-front store-houses. There it remained for some months, despite the great shortage of household goods across in Belgrade, for there were more serious problems for the new Yugoslav Government to handle than sorting over this great mass of ownerless property.

A week or so afterwards, when my wife and I discovered an enormous grand piano in the house which we rented in Belgrade, we became possessed of about the only one remaining in the city. It was a colossal affair (I think it must have been built on that very spot for some giant performer), and evidently the Austrians had found it at the last minute too big to get out by any door or window. The picture of luxury called up by mention of the fact that we had a grand piano, however, is quite misleading, for in all the rest of the twenty-four rooms which our house boasted there was not, when we moved into it, another stick of furniture of any description except for a broken operating-table and several cases of detonating fuses!

To go back to Semlin. All the Danube ferries save one having been sunk or maimed, the early morning trip of the surviving craft was a popular event. It had been built to carry maybe two hundred persons. But just as the only train arrived each day carrying its load on the tops of the cars, on the running-boards, and squeezed in precariously on the couplings, so the ferry was loaded down until every spot except the top of the old ramshackle funnel was plastered solidly with humanity. It was a fearful crowd, wonderfully arrayed,—peasants in dilapidated costumes that had once been models for the “local colorists” of many a *Chocolate Soldier* production,—soldiers, Serbian, but dressed in the uniforms of every army under the sun, including that of the former crack Hapsburg regiments, minus only the insignias of rank,—farmers from the Roumanian shore down the river, in conical sheep-skin hats and extraordinary concoctions of frayed

coats and untanned leather trousers,—and chocolate-skinned gipsies, their black hair hanging in strings about their faded calico and linen dresses, shoeless, though it was a bitter winter morning just following the heaviest snow of the season. Part of this motley crowd were bound for the city market to sell some last remainder of a herd of goats or a sack of potatoes; the rest were making their way back to homes in the south from which they had been deported by Austrian orders. Accompanying the latter was a great accumulation of household gear,—battered tin kettles, bits of stove-pipe with a chicken or two stuffed in the top, bundles of frayed comforters and sacking tied up with forlorn harness,—all the junk which destitute persons, returning to desolated homes after exile in a foreign land, might be expected to cling to with passionate faith in its value and usefulness.

As the boat neared the Serbian side of the river this jam of man and beast managed in some miraculous manner to break up into groups and to move about. Squirring babies escaped from their parents and were screamed after and pursued through the tangle of legs and among the goats and chicken-coops. Orders were shouted by several officers in as many languages at the man supposed to be steering the boat. He managed to retain control of his faculties, however, and by some heavenly guidance brought the careening old craft into collision with the shore in the general neighborhood of the place where its arrival was awaited.

We landed amid universal pandemonium, and trudged up the hill through deep snow in search of the hotel which we deluded ourselves into thinking might still be functioning after four and a half years of war. An old Baedeker “starred” one hotel, the Moscow, and spoke of another, the Grand, “with a glass dome and sun-parlors.” The Moscow we found with its side caved in, doorless and windowless; it stood empty and staring at us from a hundred vacant eyes through all the months of our stay in the city. The Grand had only had its roof and top floor removed by a bomb, but this accident had left the remaining tier of bedrooms without any ceilings, and the proprietor contented himself with running a restaurant on the ground floor, where some tarpaulins and sacking took the place of the former stained-glass dome.

This landlord who had no hotel turned out to be a genial and

talkative person. Moreover, he talked in English, for he had lived in New York once, where he had been employed as chief "bouncer" at Terrace Garden. He was eager to converse of Harlem and the Pabst Casino and the pleasures of Brighton Beach, and in return for the opportunity to air his knowledge gladly offered us assistance in the difficult matter of finding a roof to cover our heads. With his aid, and, more important, that of the American Minister (who had arrived a few days earlier with the Serbian Government from its exile in Corfu), we found a place where there actually was hot-water, food, and a steam-heating plant, though a frost-bitten one. This haven was—a hospital! We felt this to be exactly the place we needed, after six days and nights consumed in making the trip up from Trieste which normally should take only twenty hours,—days of argument with railroad officials who did not see any necessity of running trains, nights spent in railway stations or in windowless compartments of cars stranded on some siding while the engineer and his engine were off searching for enough coal or wood to haul us on to the next town. We were about ready for a hospital, and we rejoiced greatly at finding a friendly one which consented to take us in.

I will not attempt to describe minutely the aspect of Belgrade in the first days of our stay there, any more than I can tell in this brief account the details of the heroic defense of the city against the invaders in 1914 and again in 1915, or the strategy of the Serb commanders which, combined with the unconquerable spirit and hardihood of the peasant soldiery, kept at bay Austro-Magyar-German forces three and four times the strength of the defenders. I must, however, speak of Field-Marshal Zhivoyin Mishitch, who not only was responsible for the decisive operations at Rudnik in December, 1914, as a result of which the Austrians under Portiorek were driven headlong from Serbia with a loss of over 40,000 prisoners, but who later was the chief hero of the astonishing resurrection of the Serbian nation, the man who led the Serbian armies through the valley of defeat to the heights of victory.

Mishitch was invariably spoken of by his countrymen, as well as by their kinsmen across the Danube whom he helped free from the Hapsburg yoke, simply as the "Voivode"—"The Leader of

the People,"—an old title of medieval Serb leaders which was revived to do honor to modern commanders. The Voivode died just the other day at Belgrade. Though his name was so little known on this side of the Atlantic that the papers ignored his death, it is proper to recall that he was one of the really great captains of the war, one of that small group of men who decided its course and at last made sure the common victory. Almost the first of that little group to die, his name should not so soon be forgotten.

Anyone who chanced to know Mishitch in every-day peacetime life would doubtless have found difficulty in visualizing him as a great leader of men. He was so unassuming and mild that one imagined the stories of his indefatigability and inspiring bravery and canny strategy in the field must have sprung up out of the native love of the Serbs for a mythological hero rather than from anything he himself had done. But no error could have been greater. Mishitch's modesty and kindness covered an iron will. His great tactical talent was the admiration of the Allied soldiers with whom he was associated. And of all the Allied leaders it was he whom the British Government chose first to reward with the Grand Cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George as well as knighthood in the Order of the Bath. As he received the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, the Croix de Guerre with seven palms (and, incidentally, he was prouder of that than of any of his honors), and a dozen other of the most exalted decorations, there seems to have been plenty of recognition in military circles of his standing among the commanders of the Great War. Such rewards and honors, however, are superfluous evidences of his genius. The real evidence is to be found in the actuality of the free state of Yugoslavia, toward the creation of which he contributed so much.

I met Voivode Mishitch the day after our arrival in Belgrade, and saw him frequently during the difficult interim that ensued. Peace had been declared to exist, but no evidences of it had made their appearance. The minds of the soldiers and government officials who had just returned to their desolated country-side and wrecked villages were still filled with memories of the bitter days of the slow retreat southward which had ended only after the

terrible Albanian mountains had been crossed and the remnants of the army—the “Army That Can Never Die”—were gathered sadly at Corfu.

It was at that moment of despair in Corfu that Mishitch began a task which to everyone, Allied advisers included, seemed all but impossible of fulfilment. Taking those disconsolate battered fragments of an outmatched army, those exiles who had seen their homes over-run and destroyed and who feared that few of their relatives could have escaped butchery, those weary refugees who only by some lucky chance had escaped the death from disease and famine and cold which had overtaken most of their comrades, he set to work to recreate out of them a fighting force. None but those hardy mountaineers, inheritors of a precarious existence and inured to the hardships and sufferings of incessant warfare with Turk and Austrian and Magyar, could have responded to such a call; and no one but a man of iron determination like the Voivode would have dared suggest it. Three months after he had begun his work the first reconstructed fighting units of the Serbian Army began arriving at Saloniki and taking over a share of the Macedonia front.

It was a miracle, British and French observers said, and it was Mishitch who worked it.

Thoughts of these years of exile and hardship filled the minds of those who began straggling back to Belgrade as soon as the Armistice was declared. It was a difficult and uncertain time for the new Yugoslav state. There was the harassing knowledge that revengeful or ambitious neighbors kept watch from every side for first signs of disunity and internal discontent. To the north were the Austrians and Magyars, traditional enemies of the Slav; to the east were the Bulgars, whose entry into the war in 1915 on the side of the Central Powers had been the last straw that broke the Serbian back; to the west were Albanian komitadji bands and Montenegrin royalist hangers-on who were only too ready to make themselves the instruments of Italian intrigue. Amid these uncertainties, and a hundred equally disconcerting internal problems, the Yugoslav Government was attempting to consolidate its position, centralize authority over the new districts, restore communications, build up normal economic processes, and

reorganize the army so that some of the older and more worn veterans might be released from service.

Most of the Serbian soldiers who marched up the long winding Shumadya road that leads into the capital from the south—one of the most ancient roads in all Europe, trodden almost continuously through the centuries by the feet of victorious invaders and weary captives—had been in the field, away from their homes and families, for five, six and even seven years. They were desperately anxious for demobilization and a chance to find out who of their relatives were still alive and whether any part of their little farms had escaped the destruction spread broadcast by the invaders from the north. Their discontent when they discovered that they were not even yet free of their enemies, that there might very possibly be still more fighting to be done, was natural but none the less dangerous. Without a strong man like Mishitch at their head, a man, moreover, who had their affection as well as their admiration and obedience, the Serbian troops, having proved the saviors of their country might easily have become a menace to it. Confusion and discontent were gaining ground in various parts of the country as it became evident that peace, even though better than war, was not to bring back at one leap all the supplies of food and clothes and lodgings which had so long been lacking. But such was the loyalty of the army to the leader who had brought them back in triumph to their country, that in spite of delay in demobilization and in spite of the lack of uniforms and the absence of almost all essential military supplies, there was never any real doubt that the young Government could depend on the integrity and faithfulness of its armed forces. It was enabled to deal firmly with discontented elements at home and present a united front to jealous neighbors abroad, and finally to bring comparative order out of chaos.

Belgrade itself was a forlorn place when we arrived, without light, with only occasional trickles of water, with scanty and strange supplies of food, with no coal, and with only such wood as could be brought in to town on ox-carts for sale at fabulous prices. Even this high-priced wood could be obtained only with the greatest difficulty, and when one heard the creaking of ungreased cart-wheels outside the window one tore out to see if a load of



wood were going by and if so whether it could be bought for any sum.

The office where Voivode Mishitch carried on all his business and where he could be found from seven in the morning until late at night, was probably unlike that of any other commander of a European army. As is the case with all Belgrade buildings (and the barn-like structure which housed the Voivode and his aids was one of the most substantial in the city) the Staff Headquarters was made of putty-colored stucco and plaster, and as it was placed below the level of the street, the lower floors were damp and retained their primitive smells and vapors to a degree unusual even in Serbia. The Commander-in-Chief's room was reached by means of a dark, windowless corridor, paved with uneven bricks and flanked by black wooden doors opening into cubicles where the members of the General Staff had their offices and where their orderlies, to judge by the air and the crumbs on the floor, ate and slept at night.

Like his predecessor, Putnik, the hero of the first part of the war in the Balkans, Mishitch liked a room with the most terrifically high temperature. I think it was usually kept at about eighty degrees. After five minutes' conversation with the Voivode in that oven one's brain began to reel, one's eyes to water, and the walls, hung with their large-scale staff maps, went dancing off in hazy wiggly lines. He sat at an enormous unvarnished wooden table, piled high with maps and documents, the latter written out laboriously in long-hand, as is the case with practically all communications in the Serbian army, where typewriters and field-clerks are as unknown as quadruplicate requisition blanks and vouchers and ten-page "endorsements through channels." The Voivode's movements were quiet, and he sat very still while conversing. It is highly improbable that his eyes were blue, as I remember seeing few Serbians with blue eyes; the impression that they were is possibly the result of his grey hair and ruddy cheeks, which one usually associates with eyes of that color. I can see the old fellow now, wreathed in the smoke of the cigarettes which he smoked incessantly, and which (to salve his conscience for disobeying the doctor) he always announced that he used *très très rarement*.

With the death of Voivode Mishitch, Serbia loses one of her most striking and, to my mind, one of her most useful leaders. His main work was, indeed, accomplished, in that the tasks ahead of the new state of Yugoslavia are now economic and political rather than military. His mere presence in the capital, however, was in the nature of a call to patriotic unselfishness, a reminder of the dangers and difficulties through which the Serb people had passed before achieving unity and freedom. With him passes one of the outstanding figures of Serbia's most heroic age; and we have broken one chief link with the greatest war of history.

Despite its heritage of crime, despite the opportunities for fresh crime presented at every turn, Belgrade was an extraordinarily well-behaved place. As I have said, it had been occupied for three years by an alien invader, who had pillaged the houses and shops and terrorized the inhabitants. It had been a mecca for all the secret agents and propagandists and general riff-raff that follow in the wake of an army. Even those houses which had not been utterly wrecked had been broken into and then deserted, with doors smashed in and belongings strewed about in the wildest confusion. Yet only once while we were in Belgrade did I hear of any robbery of importance, and there were no acts of violence of any sort. It was absolutely safe to walk about the pitch-black streets at any hour of the night. One was not molested either by bandits or by over-zealous guardians of public order. Occasionally after dark one met small patrols of soldiers from the garrison over in the old fort that juts out above the confluence of the Danube and the Save Rivers, but they were not forever making burdensome demands to see the identification papers of passers-by, as was the habit in most European cities at that time. This city of the Balkans, famous in fable and comic-opera song as the haunt of brigands and desperados, pictured in the story-books as teeming with bandits with belts stuck full of daggers, was safer than any of the capitals of western Europe and certainly safer than New York to-day.

I can account for the good behavior and sobriety of Belgrade under such disorganized circumstances only by the character and spirit of its citizens. They had known the heel of the oppressor, they rejoiced exceedingly to be able to call their souls their own;

determined to give an example of earnestness and patriotism to the rest of the country, they kept their city safe and calm when the big cities of nations which proportionately had known only a tithe of Serbia's rigors of war were in a state of riotous anarchy and crime. Belgrade is a dull little place to outward view, not in the least mysterious or exciting or gay. But a city cannot be for years, as Belgrade was, the centre of a great nationalistic and spiritual awakening without making that cause part of its own daily life. It is possessed by that spirit which has made the Serbs, perhaps of all the peoples of Europe, the most jealous of freedom, the most determined to control their own destinies free from the political or economic domination of other nations. Belgrade stands for the soul of Serbia. She has been well chosen by France to receive the salutations which one heroic state addresses to another when the common victory has been won.

HAMILTON FISH ARMSTRONG.